

Enjoying Marriage vs. Enduring Marriage

Over the years Mom and I have had the chance to attend the temple many, many times. During the course of those visits we have observed so many couples, many of them elderly, that seem to be so happy and still in love. As they walk into the temple or as we see them some where else in the temple, they are holding hands and smile at each other. There is something in their eyes that lets you know they love each other – they are sweethearts. There is no doubt that they are truly enjoying marriage.

Conversely, we have seen too many couples that simply seem to be going through the motions. They may be in the same room, but, they really aren't there together. Their life is some type of managed cohabitation. If they have been married in the temple, they seem to think putting up with one another through mortality will somehow miraculously guarantee them an eternal future of bliss and contentment. This may be the case, but, if I was a betting man, I would say there is more required than that. These are people that are simply enduring marriage.

Obviously, these are two ends of the spectrum. I would suppose that there are many degrees of marriage felicity that fall in between. However, for purposes of this article, I submit two theories for your consideration of enjoying vs. enduring a marriage: 1) the effort required to enjoy marriage is considerably less than the effort and negative energy that goes into enduring marriage, 2) the happiness from enjoying a marriage is many, many fold greater than the discontentment that comes from the marriage of “endurance”.

The purpose of this D.O.P.E. submission is to share with you some of the things Mom and I have learned over the years from our own experiences, discussions and observations. Also, from what our church leaders have taught and what we have learned from talking with those that know the happiness that comes from enjoying a marriage verses enduring a marriage.

In this day and age there is no shortage of advice on the matter of marriage. Bookstores are spilling over with self-help books and a myriad of opinions on what makes a successful marriage. My biggest problem with so many of the philosophies of the world is that they are not necessarily based on the teachings of the Savoir and the prophets. For the most part, because they do not know any better, they operate on a totally different plane than those that have been to the temple or have the true principles of the gospel in their lives. Too many times this worldly advice takes the approach of how to make marriage fair and equitable – making sure that you get your fair share out of the relationship. They seem self-centered strategies from the beginning.

Selfishness and Pride

Selfishness and pride seem to be the primary factors of marital discord. One man told me, “our marriage is ‘give and take’. What she don't give, I take”. That's one marriage that is very one-sided due to both pride and selfishness. The other expression that seems just as problematic is, “it's my way or the highway” (you do things my way or you hit the

road). I do not mean to suggest that the advice of the world through self-help books are in the same genre as these extreme points of view, but, they have the same starting point of “what can *I* do to manage a relationship so it is fair to *me*”.

Attached to this submission is a diagram that I think effectively demonstrates the plane on which the world operates. I will call this the “Common Ground” approach (Diagram 1). I also have attached another diagram that I think equally demonstrates the proper approach to creating an awesome marriage. I will name this diagram the “Celestial Standard” approach (Diagram 2). It requires some very basic geometry involving sets and subsets. (Michael, perhaps you can get some help from the other kids on this.)

The Common Ground approach operates primarily on the horizontal axis. Imagine two circles that sit on the x-axis and overlap somewhat. This represents two people in a relationship that have some common interests and values, i.e., they both believe it is wrong to steal, they both love cats and dogs, etc. Much of the time they can be happy because they do have common ground on which they agree or have similar likes and interests.

However, problems arise when one partner decides to pursue a course of action that does not fall within the set of the other. For example, Bill decides that he should change his career. His new job will have him travelling so that he will be gone from home 75% of the time. His wife, Mary, feels very strongly that he should not change his profession because of the detrimental effect it might have on their marriage and their two small children. The Common Ground approach dictates that they employ some type of negotiation to strike a compromise with which they can both live. So...back and forth they go in an attempt to satisfy the desires of their particular aspirations.

The “Celestial Standard” approach operates on the premise that both individuals know and understand the standards the lord has taught and what our church leaders advise. This approach requires that we elevate our eyes and move our circles toward a higher level. Then, as both people attempt to move their circle as close as possible to that standard they find that they have more and more in common – they are both reaching and striving for the same thing. In the example above, it is not how much money the husband can make by accepting a new job. The focus is now centered on how well the new job coincides with what they know is the “Celestial Standard”. That becomes the measuring stick for their decisions. Similarly, the wife may not accept a job outside of the home because she recognizes the counsel of our church leaders for the mother to have the main responsibility for raising and influencing children. It is an easier decision for both of them to make because they have the same values and standard by which they make decisions.

Compatibility

So many marriages end in divorce these days because two people say they are not compatible. Hogwash, no one is truly compatible. If compatibility were truly a legitimate reason for divorce, none of us would be married. Besides, what a boring life it

would be if we were all exactly the same. I would probably end up strangling Mom if she were exactly like me! No, compatibility is not the issue. The real issue is more the universal sin of pride (see the attached talk by President Benson) and selfishness.

I mentioned some of these ideas to Michael one day and he shared with me a most interesting experience. He told of being assigned to a new missionary companion while serving in Argentina. From the moment he heard of his assignment to his new companion he became disappointed and unhappy. His unhappiness became more severe as they actually began working together. He did not like this person and nothing was going to make it better. He saw himself as better than his companion. This all began to change when he realized that their problems were related to his pride. For two weeks he carried around with him President Benson's conference talk regarding pride. Every time he sensed those feelings of pride or discouragement he would read the talk. He would also pray for more humility. As he did so there was a miraculous change in that companionship. As he has reflected back on this time of his mission, this was one of his best companionships.

In this experience, it was no longer "comparability" (a symptom of pride), but rather, a submission to the spirit and wanting to do what was right that made this a great missionary companionship. Likewise in our marriages, we need to be submissive to the spirit. All too frequently our pride prevents us from accepting the right course of action. We are usually too concerned about "who is right" instead of "what is right".

For example, take the couple who are travelling to a dinner party and they are tight on time. The husband says he thinks he knows the way. The wife is concerned about being on time and suggests they stop for directions. He has a hard time taking that advice from his wife because he feels she is saying he doesn't know anything and refuses to stop. She gets upset. He takes a wrong turn and gets them lost and eventually has to stop for directions at a local gas station. They are late and she is not talking to him the rest of the night. He's upset she is not talking to him and retaliates by not talking to her. This goes on for three days.

The world might have some creative solutions to this type of problem. Perhaps the couple could agree to accept the other's advice every other time. They could take turns. When it is the husband's turn, they keep driving. When it is the wife's turn, they can stop and confirm their directions. (Then they could argue about whose turn it is!) This compromise may alleviate some problems but does not address feelings that can still remain in the heart.

The "Celestial Standard" approach might work something like this. Because the husband is striving to live the gospel with all his might and is trying to be humble, he recognizes that he has been wrong once or twice before. He says, "you know honey, I think I know the way, but, just to be safe let's stop and make sure." Because he accepts the fact that he could be wrong and he wants to make sure he considers the wise advice of the most important person in his life, they stop for directions and arrive at the party on time. Pride does not get in the way of doing the right thing.

It would be unfortunate for the husband to ignore his wife's advice. But still, late or not to the party, she should not let that get in the way of their relationship. The right thing for her to do is forget the incident or very lovingly point out what happened. Then, focus on what the "Celestial Standard" would dictate she should do. If he is humble, he will listen to her and learn from the experience. It takes both people being humble and trying to live the principles of the gospel. The end result is greater harmony and love.

Men and Women are Different

It would be incorrect to say that the inherent differences that exist between men and women are not some of the reasons for problems in a marriage. Science seems to have done a great job in establishing the facts about these differences in our physical make up, emotions, perspectives, etc. Because of these significant differences, it is all the more important we recognize that the gospel is the divinely-ordained way to deal with them than what the world has to offer. Living the gospel can make these differences complimentary to each other instead of divisive.

For example, a woman may be undergoing some hormonal changes in life that can have an effect on her perspective of things and her attitude. She may not understand what is going on, nor her husband. This type of thing can be very trying on a relationship. But, if the husband will be patient and understanding, it will help get them through the difficult time. Sooner or later, they figure things out and the behavior of the one partner is so greatly appreciated by the other. The exercise of patience, love and humility overcome so much that otherwise would become serious problems in the relationship.

Men have been known to go through a phase of life called a "midlife crisis". They feel like they have peaked in life and want to somehow avoid that by going back to what they use to do or have when they were younger. If a woman is patient and understanding with this nonsense, the two of them can get through it all. To the extent both can make decisions based on what the "Celestial Standard" calls for, the better off they will be.

What to Avoid

From our observations, here are some important things to avoid in relationships:

1. Pride. As discussed before, the most important thing is what is right, not, who is right. Be humble enough to do what your are suppose to because it is the right thing to do. Avoid the debilitating effects of pride.
2. Negative thinking. Try not to focus on the negative things in a relationship. Here is a simple example. When a husband comes home and says, "Wow, the house is a mess", he can expect he has offended his wife to some degree he should not be surprised if matters get worse the rest of the evening. If he comes home and says, "Honey, I have missed you all day and I am so glad to be home with you", he can expect a whole different relationship with his wife than the first approach. We should

be careful in what we say. Our words can have a downward spiraling effect or an upward spiraling effect on our marital relationship.

If couples would put constructive, hard work into a marriage to the same extent they spend focusing on the negative things, they would find an incredibly happy marriage. How about one step further, what would happen if they replaced any negative comments with nothing but kind, polite, uplifting, positive comments?

3. Isolation. Avoid getting away from each other. Sometimes “going home to see mother” is not the way to resolve problems. The answer is not spending more time at the office or ignoring one another. You have to face the situation and resolve the problem in humility and selflessness.
4. Hardness of heart. This ties so closely to what has been said about humility. No matter what happens, do not harden your heart toward each other. Recognize that you may have a disagreement, but, do not let that harden your heart. Remember who that other person is. You love them. Your differences will work themselves out over time. Your marriage is for eternity.
5. Impaired judgement. A wife may ask her husband to buy a pint of cream from the grocery store when he returns from work. When he shows up at the house without the cream, she goes into a horrible diatribe about how irresponsible her husband is. Something is terribly wrong when we take our spouse down from a pedestal and replace them with a pint of cream! When we really stop and think about it, how dumb to let a little pint of cream, or any thing else, get in the way of a beautiful marriage relationship.
6. Pin pricking. Don't do or say things that are deliberately designed to irritate or bother your spouse. Some times this comes through a sarcastic remark or an action that you know annoys your spouse. This type of behavior prolongs ill feeling and is diametrically opposed to what the Celestial Standard would dictate.

Well, there you have it. Follow this advice and you will never go wrong! You will always enjoy your marriage. Seriously, read this and think it over. Maybe you do not agree with everything I say. That's okay. However, one thing I think is inextricably connected with a happy marriage; we have to ponder these type of things and really work to make sure we do them. It takes constant effort. The most wonderful marriages I know of involve two people who have worked hard at helping and serving each other. Good luck and if you do have problems or questions, talk to your Mother.

Disclaimer: I feel a little bit like the arm chair quarterback during an NFL Monday Night Football game. It is so easy to say a million things and be very critical. It is quite a different thing to actually do them yourself. I am as deficient as any man when it comes to doing my part in a great marriage.